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SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND THE PTA: PARTNERING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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Abstract

School systems and parents have fought over control of K-12 education for more than 150 years. However, the COVID-19 pandemic shined a spotlight on the need for school systems and parents to build cross-sectoral partnerships to deliver that education. One vehicle for this cross-sectoral partnership is the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) found in every school district. Partnering is not a novel idea in education. School districts partner with colleges and universities, after-school providers, and school-based health systems. It is time for educators and their communities to reexamine and strengthen their cross-sectoral partnership with the nongovernmental organization that is already there, the local PTA.

Keywords: education; cross-sectoral partnerships; kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) schools; Parent Teacher Associations; PTA; non-governmental organizations; NGOs

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In his book, *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control of American Education* (2000), William Cutler maintains that school systems and parents have fought over control of K-12 education for more than 150 years. However, during the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly shined a spotlight on the need for school systems and parents to become partners in their children's education. This necessary cooperation could be realized by a strong school partnership with a 100-year-old nongovernmental organization (NGO), the organization known as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

Many educational organizations form innovative and diverse partnerships to gain resources or to take on new projects in areas where they have little experience. Some collaborations are with other educational organizations, such as dual-enrollment partnerships between kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) systems and community colleges. Other educational organizations form partnerships with entities outside of the education sector. For example, universities and community colleges frequently partner with the business sector, and public school systems often partner with school-based health organizations, private after-school programs, and other NGOs.

All the aforementioned partnerships represent inter-sector or cross-sectoral partnerships (Siegel, 2010). Unlike traditional partnerships, cross-sectoral partnerships such as those between high schools and their feeder middle schools, or an institute co-hosted by one university in New York and another in London, connect entities from different organizational sectors. In the 21st century, cross-sector partnerships are important to the sustainability of K-12 systems. And with the COVID-19 pandemic still impacting school systems, cross-sectoral partnerships become critically important.

The partnerships between school systems and their nongovernmental partners, the local Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), are prominent examples of cross-sectoral partnerships anchored in different parts of the education sector. While both organizations function in the education space, the school system/PTA partnership is viewed as cross-sectoral because public schools are governed by school boards and operated by a professional staff, whereas PTAs are NGOs operated entirely by committed volunteers. Hence, for the purposes of this article, the school system/PTA partnership is considered cross-sectoral.

Cross-sector partnerships, according to Siegel (2010), are formed for several reasons, which he categorizes as domains of partnership. While Siegel's work primarily discusses cross-sectoral partnerships between universities and other organizations, he points out that his work is also useful for examining other cross-sectoral social cause partnerships. Therefore, this article uses his approach to cross-sector partnerships to examine the

cross-sectoral partnership between one school system and its PTA. A key finding from this examination is that school systems and their local PTAs should develop mutual and/or domain-focused cross-sectoral partnerships to better respond to the COVID-19 emergency.

Siegel (2000) describes six principal partnership domains, starting with *efficiency*, *resource dependence*, and *legitimacy*, all of which are concerned with the **impact of external pressures and sector norms** on the partnering organizations. Partnerships driven by the efficiency, resource dependence, and legitimacy domains want to borrow these factors from one another to enhance their day-to-day operations. The remaining three of Siegel's six domains, *leverage*, *mutuality*, and *domain focus*, are more **entrepreneurial**. Organizations partnering within these domains want to join together to introduce new programs or to solve large problems beyond their usual daily operations. This article uses these six domains to examine the cross-sectoral partnership between one public school system and its local PTA.

To identify the domain relationships in this type of partnership, I reviewed one academic year's minutes of the Board of Directors' meetings for a PTA in a suburban school district in Maryland (hereafter, SSD). Most of the PTAs in the Middle Atlantic states, specifically the large suburban Virginia and Maryland school districts, have county-level PTAs that represent their local school building PTAs. The suburban Maryland school district studied for this article, SSD, represents more than 200 school building PTAs. The county level PTA's leadership is elected from among the nearly 1,000 delegates who comprise the local school building PTAs. With its large group of professional parents, the PTA leadership and school building delegates regularly engage with the school superintendent and systems staff. They also serve on joint committees with SSD, particularly on larger issues. Hence, this article focused on the collaborations between SSD and a county-level council of PTAs, not a single school building PTA.

The examination revealed that this school system and the PTA did not have a formal, long-term agreement that would have allowed the partners to undertake numerous action steps in response to external pressures and/or to entrepreneurial opportunities. Instead, the two organizations, during the school year, formed more than three dozen, mostly temporary, cross-sectoral partnerships to both sustain their own operations and to respond to new and bigger challenges. Therefore, because of this lack of a formal partnering arrangement, I utilized Siegel's partnership domains to categorize the dozens of temporary partnerships between SSD and its PTA during one academic year.

For the review, I examined each month's minutes for actions taken by the PTA or the school system wherein one or the other initiated a temporary partnership with the other organization. During this first review, nearly 40 partnering events were identified over the 12-month period. Next, for the second review of the events, I eliminated the PTA partnerships in the minutes that were with organizations other than SSD, e.g., the teachers' union and student government. Then, for the third review, each of the remaining actions was assigned to one of Siegel's six domains that seemed to define that partnering event. Each of the events was categorized under only the one predominant and/or most obvious domain, thereby eliminating the need to assign events to more than one domain. These three steps reduced the total number of partnering events between the PTA and SSD to 15 for the academic year. Numerous other partnership events between the two entities during the school year were reviewed but not categorized because they either were not well defined or the outcomes were unclearly recorded in the minutes.

Examining those 15 temporary cross-sectoral partnerships between SSD and the local PTA, one sees a variety of domain partnerships used to address a variety of school system operations and challenges. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. PTA and Suburban School District Partnering Activities by Dates and Domains

Actions	Domains
September Partnership Actions: None	
October Partnership Actions:	
PTA writes safe water resolution to SSD.	Leverage
PTA forms multi-stakeholder task force for SSD bus stop pedestrian safety.	Domain Focus
November Partnership Actions:	
SSD promotes AAP to families via PTA.	Efficiency
PTA starts student business challenge with SSD support.	Leverage
PTA OBC works with SSD & school board re public testimony on budget.	Domain Focus
December Partnership Actions:	
PTA hosts public info session on state funds for SSD.	Domain Focus
PTA hosts Health/Wellness Fair for SSD families; Superintendent attends.	Mutuality
January Partnership Actions:	
SSD promotes Parents' Advisory Council through PTA.	Mutuality
February Partnership Actions:	
SSD's AAP/PTA partner on guidelines for principal and PTA interactions.	Mutuality
PTA funds reception for state legislators in capital.	Domain Focus
March Partnership Actions:	
PTA promotes County Council forums on SSD.	Domain Focus
April Partnership Actions:	
PTA's hosted LGBTQ forum for families & students; Superintendent attends.	Mutuality
SSD/PTA task force re individual school fundraising.	Mutuality
SSD promotes FES thru PTA.	Efficiency
May Partnership Actions: None	
June Partnership Actions:	
SSD promotes OSSl thru PTA.	Efficiency

Adapted from Siegel (2010)

In September, there were no instances of SSD and PTA partnering under the conditions previously described. However, October saw the PTA lead the partnering in two of the entrepreneurial domains:

- Drafting a safe water resolution to SSD to **leverage** its influence with the school system leadership.

- Proposing a task force that included the school system and other stakeholders, such as public safety and county planning, to increase pedestrian safety at school bus stops. This was a **domain-focused** partnership formed to address a large problem.

In November, there were three instances of partnering:

- The PTA provided information to families about SSD's Association of Administrators and Principals (AAP). This was an instance of the PTA lending **efficiency** to enable SSD to reach school families.
- The PTA Board also heard about a new Student Business Challenge that would be **leveraged** through SSD.
- The PTA Operating Budget Committee (OBC) announcing its budget training session. This last instance was a **domain-focused** activity of both the PTA and SSD as well as the Board of Education wherein they all partnered in the development of the school system's annual operating budget.

In December, there were two instances of partnering:

- The OBC announced it was hosting an update for parents and other stakeholders on new state funding for local education. This event was another **domain-focused** PTA action, important to both the PTA and the SSD.
- In another **entrepreneurial domain**, the PTA Board heard information about an upcoming Mental Health and Wellness Fair (MH&WF), which was supported by SSD. The MH&WF was a **mutuality** partnership in that it addressed a large challenge for both the school system and their families.

In January, the PTA again acted in the **mutuality** domain with the school system when members volunteered to join SSD's Parent Advisory Council.

In February, once again the partners acted in the **entrepreneurial** domains.

- SSD's Association of Administrators and Principals (AAP) and some PTA delegates presented their joint recommendations for *Best Practices* in principal/PTA

interactions to the monthly PTA Board meeting. This was another instance in which the two parties shared a **mutuality** of interest in addressing a large issue.

- The PTA authorized funding for a legislative reception. This advocacy activity was a **domain-focused** partnership involving state and county legislators as well as SSD officials.

In March, the **domain-focused** partnering continued as the PTA organized attendance at county education forums.

April then provided two instances of **mutuality**:

- SSD's superintendent served as a guest speaker for the PTA's LGBTQ forum for families and students.
- The PTA and SSD partnered on a task force to design new policies for individual school fundraising.

Finally, in April, in the **efficiency** domain, SSD promoted its Family Engagement Survey through the PTA.

There were no partnering activities in May. The year finished in June, when SSD's Office of School Support & Improvement (OSSI) utilized the PTA to communicate to families about their staff assignments. This OSSI communication through the PTA to parents was another instance of the PTA providing an **efficient** means for SSD to operate.

Of the 15 total cross sector partnering actions between SSD and its PTA that were categorized into Siegel's principal domains, only three of the actions were categorized as being in the external pressure domains (legitimacy, efficiency, and resource dependence): helping the partner to carry out daily operations.

In each of these external pressure domain actions, the school system used the PTA's resources to efficiently engage and communicate with PTA members and school district

families. However, while the PTA did gain some legitimacy from the actions, there were no instances of the PTA using SSD's resources to more efficiently connect with their own stakeholders. This imbalance in external partnering suggests that these external domain actions were less than full partnerships.

On the other hand, within the entrepreneurial opportunity domains (leverage, mutuality, and domain focus), there were 12 temporary partnerships formed during the school year. This means that 80% of the SSD/PTA partnering actions were for entrepreneurial purposes. The large difference between the number of external pressure domain and entrepreneurial domain instances may be because the SSD and PTA each reached out for partnerships when an initiative was beyond the operating capacity of their own resources. Therefore, when they took on these entrepreneurial, riskier initiatives and sector-wide educational problems, they probably partnered to gain new resources (human, financial, and political) for those bigger challenges.

In those 12 entrepreneurial domain actions there were two instances of leveraging between PTA and SSD. Both times, the PTA leveraged the school system for help on an issue that was new to them. There were also five occasions of mutuality and five of domain focus. As discussed above, when the organizations entered entrepreneurial activity, taking on new and riskier challenges, both organizations most likely recognized the need to gain a full-fledged partner for those major endeavors. Within the five mutuality domain instances, it is important to note that all the partnership efforts were joint SSD/PTA task forces. Furthermore, the five instances of domain-focused partnerships were also high-visibility events relative to other domains. Both the SSD and the PTA seemed to recognize that when they chose to undertake major cross-sector issues, actions that were riskier and required the movement of many organizational parts, multi-stakeholder partnerships were necessary. All 12 of these entrepreneurial projects were full partnerships, as both the PTA and SSD committed resources to their mutual and their domain-focused challenges.

The findings of this examination suggest that when a school system and its PTA engage in full cross-sectoral partnerships, as identified in the mutual and domain-focused domains, they may be better prepared to take on major challenges to that school system. To look for further evidence of such mutual and domain-focused partnerships between school systems and PTAs, the author also examined the National PTA website. In its *PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships: An Implementation Guide*, two of the six standards touch on partnerships with schools. Their second standard calls for effective and frequent communications between families (meaning the PTA) and the school. Their third standard, on power sharing, states that families and schools “are equal partners” (National PTA, 2020, p. 29) in children’s lives. However, neither of these standards, nor the other four, describe how to develop a formal inter-organizational partnership between families (PTA) and schools. In fact, like the external pressure domains of efficiency and resource dependency actions (taken only three times in the SSD/PTA analysis), the National PTA suggests that local affiliates serve only as communications systems for the schools. The impact of the National PTA’s suggested standards is that they do not support any full mutual or domain-focused partnerships.

Additionally, there is no evidence of the National PTA promoting mutual or domain-focused partnerships in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further examination of their website found, on its page entitled *Strategies for Supporting Families During the Pandemic*, that the National PTA offers no partnership suggestions at all for managing the pandemic. Instead, it sends readers to the coronavirus information pages hosted by the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for assistance.

Finally, I communicated with more than a dozen national and state associations of superintendents and principals, and reviewed their online newsletters. I also reviewed the online newsletters of their state PTAs. This step, taken to triangulate previous findings, provided further evidence of little or no full mutual or domain-focused partnerships during the pandemic. The PTA newsletters contain numerous stories of

PTAs distributing food and computers to needy families as well as information on their school systems' pandemic policies, procedures, and reopening plans. However, the articles contain virtually no mention of collaboration with the school systems on these activities. And neither the superintendents' associations' nor the principals' associations' newsletters contain any discernable mention of their PTAs in stories about pandemic activities. We may assume that the food and computers were stored at the schools, but the reviewed articles do not mention how the PTAs coordinated with the schools on their delivery. On the other hand, the newsletter articles showed continuous efforts by PTAs to communicate information to families. In fact, the California State PTA led an effort in May 2020 to make parents' voices heard and to gain more information from school systems. This final review found that, even during a pandemic, PTAs are only leveraged by school system to communicate information and to deliver goods. PTAs are not engaged with schools in full mutual or domain-focused partnerships, working together to develop pandemic policies, procedures, and activities.

In sum, this examination suggests that school systems and PTAs need to consider developing the fuller mutual or domain-focused partnerships to better manage crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the pandemic, many of the PTA newsletters cited above contained demands for more timely and useful communications from the school systems on items such as distribution of laptops and food. Later, the need for more clear and frequent communications on school re-openings was prevalent in the media.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 virus is still with us. It is not too late for school systems and their PTAs to co-develop and implement, for example, a joint integrated strategic communications strategy to reach families frequently and clearly through the next school year. Such an inter-organizational pandemic communications partnership would include the development of mutual goals, responsibilities, and implementation steps expected of each partner, as well as the monitoring of the partnership's impacts. Similarly, school system/PTA domain-focused collaborations should also be established

to develop and manage pandemic policies on school testing, reopening schools, and special needs education, all critical issues certain to continue during the next academic year.

While this study focused on a large suburban school district and its PTA, stronger, more formal partnerships (mutuality and domain-focused) may also be developed by urban school districts and their PTAs toward the same ends. By engaging in full partnerships, large suburban and urban systems and their PTAs will go far to ensuring that their schools best serve their children, their families and their teachers during pandemics. “Each has a separate, but related task to perform that can be accomplished only in collaboration” (Cutler, 2000, p. 207).

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